

## Ernst Mayr, 5 July 1904–3 February 2005

For the second half of his life, Ernst Walter Mayr was primarily occupied with evolutionary theory and with the history and philosophy of biology. But we must remember that his training and his empirical research was in avian systematics and biogeography which formed the foundation of his later theoretical work. The rough division between these two phases in his scholarly work can be put at 1953 when he joined the Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard University. At that time he left behind the American Museum of Natural History and the superb collection of Pacific Island birds gathered by the Whitney South Sea Expedition, as well as the Rothschild Collection on which he had worked for 22 years. During this time he revised numerous genera, described 26 new species and 445 new subspecies, and most importantly published his first book, *List of New Guinea Birds* (1941), which is still the basic systematic and nomenclatural reference to the birds of this area. Hence Mayr had to become involved early in zoological nomenclature and published his first purely nomenclatural paper on the generic name *Calao* in 1931. Because he worked with birds, a group for which there probably are more active researchers than species, Mayr developed the position that the best way to achieve stability in nomenclature for such groups was by conserving well-established names rather than only by the use of strict priority. He stressed that stability in zoological nomenclature was difficult to reach efficiently with a single set of rules that applied to groups such as birds as well as to groups with large numbers of species and few specialists.

Mayr was not able to take part directly in meetings of the Commission because he was only a young assistant at the time of the Budapest Congress in 1927, was just married at the time of the Lisbon Congress in 1935, and could not attend the Paris Congress in 1948 because he had not yet obtained his American passport. As with a number of other zoologists, Mayr was disturbed by some of the extreme changes advocated at the 1948 International Zoological Congress, Paris, but which never became part of the Rules of Zoological Nomenclature. He attended the Nomenclatural Colloquium immediately prior to the Zoological Congress in Copenhagen (1953) and became the leader of the group advocating stability in zoological names. Shortly after the 1953 Congress Mayr was elected to the Commission and served from 1954 to 1976. He was present at the London Congress (1958) at which the first edition of the new Code was adopted, as well as the Washington Congress (1963) and the Monaco Congress (1972). His most important achievement was the adoption of his proposed Preamble to the Code which is an integral part of this set of rules and has remained essentially unchanged in all editions of the Code to the present one. The Preamble sets the basic scope and tone of the Code in emphasizing that stability is predominant, that each taxon has a unique name and that the Code does not restrict freedom of taxonomic action.

Mayr remained an active member of the Commission and attended all its meetings until his retirement from the Commission in 1976. Although he did little empirical research in ornithology after leaving the American Museum of Natural History in 1953, he did remain active in systematic ornithology and nomenclatural matters by becoming the main editor of the remaining volumes (8 - 15 and volume 1, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition) of Peters' *Check-list of Birds of the World*. The clear presentation of zoological

nomenclature is an important part of the three editions of his text book on animal systematics.

Ernst Mayr retired from the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard University in 1975, but remained active until his 100<sup>th</sup> year. He wrote or edited over ten books after his retirement, with his last appearing just after his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday. After his wife died in 1990, he continued to live in his home in Cambridge until 1997 when he moved to an apartment in a retirement home in Bedford, Massachusetts, about 20 miles north of Cambridge, but continued to drive to the Museum of Comparative Zoology until summer 2003. Ernst was active until early December 2004 when an illness forced him to move to the nursing wing. He passed away peacefully in the late morning of 3 February 2005.

Ernst Mayr had a long and remarkable career in the systematics and biogeography of birds, evolutionary theory and the history and philosophy of biology. It is most fortunate for zoological nomenclature that this remarkable zoologist took such an active interest in it for many decades.

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